

International Rural Network Conference (June 20, 2005)

Abingdon, Virginia

I am pleased to welcome the 2005 International Conference of the Rural Policy Research Institute to our nation's Appalachian region and to our Town of Abingdon.

We are honored that you have chosen our community as the location for this year's conference.

I would also like to thank Anne Pope, the Federal Co-Chair of the Appalachian Regional Commission, for her excellent work in advancing the quality of life in the 13 state Appalachian region and for traveling to Abingdon to take part in today's program.

In our western Virginia localities, we are putting into practice the philosophy of the theme of your conference: "The Power of Place: Rural Communities, Global Reach." And as part of my welcome to you this morning I'll mention some of the innovative steps we are taking to use our unique assets to higher advantage.

As I believe you will observe during the coming week, our mountainous region offers the best outdoor experience to be found in Virginia and one of the best recreational opportunities in the southeastern U.S.

We enjoy the highest mountains, the fastest flowing rivers and the best hiking, biking, backpacking, cross-country skiing, hunting and fishing to be found in our state.

We also have a truly unique culture, separate and apart from the more homogenized culture of the balance of the U.S. The Appalachian region is the birthplace of traditional American music and bluegrass. In our mountains we blended the music of the Celtic lands of Scotland and Ireland, with harmonies from Europe and Africa, to form something truly new and unique. The traditional American music which is at the root of country, bluegrass, rhythm and blues, and other popular music that we have exported to the world.

Many of the roots of that music are in Virginia's mountains.

Beyond music, the graphic arts, quilt making, wood working and drama of the Appalachians enrich our culture.

We have found that the combination of our environmental assets and our unique culture of music and arts and crafts is perfectly suited to the growing national and international interest in eco-tourism, and tourism is currently the fastest growing industry in our region.

To promote it we have built facilities, including the \$13 million traditional music center on our Blue Ridge Parkway, the Pickin' Porch and performance venue of the Birthplace of Country Music Alliance in Bristol, the Carter Fold in nearby Scott County at the homeplace of traditional music legends A.P. and Sarah Carter, and the Ralph Stanley Museum in Dickenson County.

We have also made tourism development a high priority of our economic development efforts, employing successfully the "Power of Place," and tourists from across the world are now visiting our communities.

Anne Pope has done a tremendous job in advancing tourism through the ARC, and I commend her for that initiative, so well-suited to the Appalachian states.

In our Virginia mountains, we are employing the "Power of Place" of a totally different but equally effective manner.

The Internet and advanced communications technologies are transformative, and rural America is a major beneficiary of the dramatic changes widespread use of advanced communications are creating.

The Internet opens new doors for the economic development of rural regions. No longer must a business be physically located near its base of customers and supplies. No longer are major businesses bound to the central cities.

In our rural regions, we have always offered a high quality of living. We also have a workforce with a high work ethic, with wages and the other business costs that are well below the national average.

Widespread use of the Internet has enabled these qualities to work in our interest as never before.

With advanced communications, virtually any business can be located anywhere.

And as broadband has made its way into rural localities, businesses are decentralizing and moving major components

into rural communities where costs are lower and hard working employees can be found.

We have done particularly well in Southwest Virginia in attracting technology-based jobs, offering a welcome diversification of the economy.

Given this success, we are making broadband deployment a major priority in our economic development strategy.

And we are using advanced communications to improve both healthcare and education.

My office has worked with offices and clinic throughout our region to install telemedicine links to the University of Virginia's Medical Center more than 200 miles away.

Now our residents can simply go to a clinic in their hometown and engage in a teleconference with a medical specialist at the University.

The patient and the doctor can see and hear each other. A high-speed data link enables medical test results, such as lab slides, X-rays and other images to be transmitted to the specialist who can then render a diagnosis with the same degree of certainty as if the patient had traveled to the University.

We now have more than 50 of these electronic sites, more than any other rural region, bringing a new era of medical diagnostic opportunity to our residents.

We installed fiber optic lines linking high schools, community colleges, and four-year colleges throughout our localities for a network of fully interactive electronic classrooms.

Now even the smallest and most financially challenged counties can make available to their students advanced instruction that originates from another location. Foreign languages, advanced mathematics, science instruction and other specialized courses are now available to all.

One of our many electronic classrooms is in this building. I hope you will have time to visit this state-of-the-art facility and observe a distance learning session in progress.

And the websites developed by our local governments are advertising to the world the special qualities of the region, expanding our potential to attract industry and grow the tourism economy.

In all of these ways, we are realizing the "Power of Place," promoting our unique and interesting assets in order to build for our citizens a better tomorrow.

I am glad you chose Abingdon for your weeklong conference. I hope you enjoy your stay in our community, and I encourage you to tell others about what we have to offer.

And thank you for allowing me to share some thoughts with you this morning.